



Review of 'Seattle Public Library: OMA/LMN'

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SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY: OMA/LMN

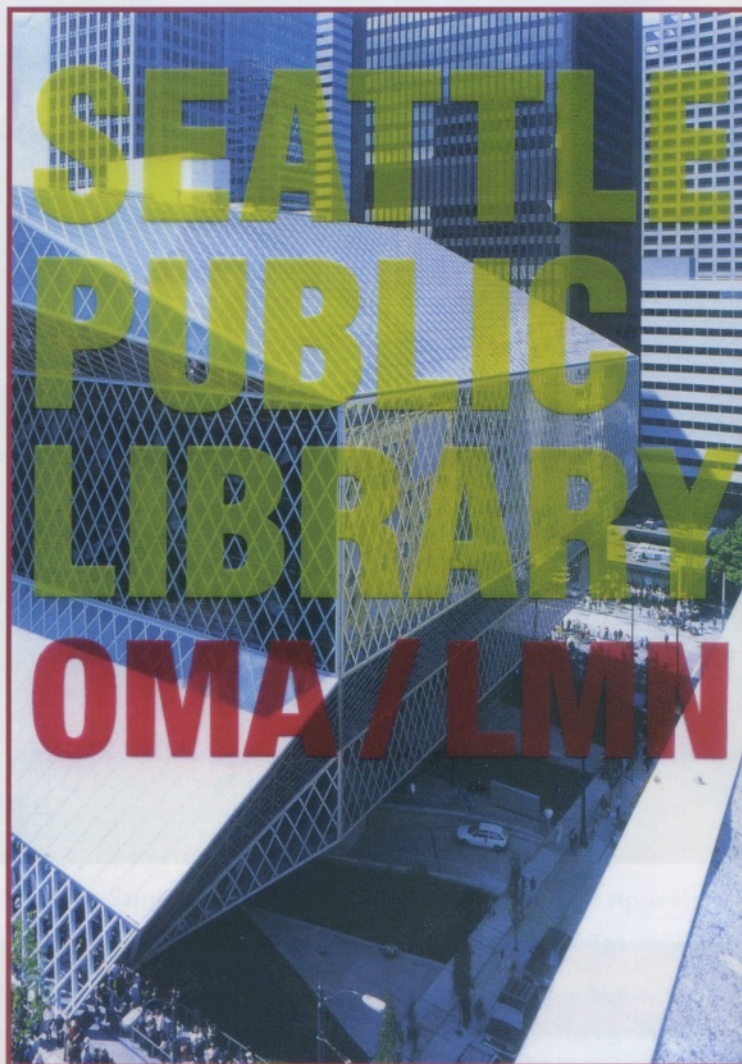
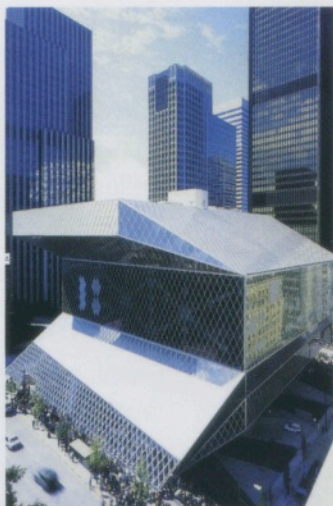
Edited by Michael Kubo and
Ramon Prat

Coffee and kerosene mingle in the air. Once the gateway to the Klondike it is now Microsoft and Boeing that dominate Seattle's new 'goldrush'. The famous space needle - a remnant from the 1962 world fair - stands amidst a skyline of bland skyscrapers and beckons to the distant snow covered Mount Rainier adrift in the smog. Downtown, the urban grid is caught between the converging arcs of the Interstate and Elliot Bay while the harbour is busy with the movement of cargo and cruise ships - the final staging post to Alaska.

Seattle is not short of architectural innovations: Venturi's Seattle Art Museum - an early manifestation of the National Gallery in London - opens up the edges of a city block with its sign-laden façade; a huge Convention Centre doubles as a shopping mall and straddles the Interstate as a gateway to the city; Pike Place Fish Market is a busy and vibrant food casbah that looks out over the bay; and Frank Gehry's EMP (Experimental Music Project) melts, twists and pulls apart like a wild chord riff by Jimi Hendrix (Seattle's famous son).

Now there is a new building on the block, "a genetically modified skyscraper" - as its famous Dutch architects (OMA) have called it. Chronicled in this new Verb Monograph, the evolution, development, construction and dissenting voices that have shaped Seattle Public Library are laid bare.

In the middle of this book - which is extensively illustrated in colour throughout - there is a text only section - a book within a book. It replays the story of the project as



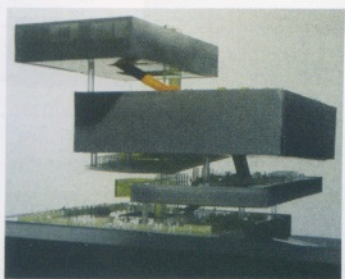
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featured in the pages of the Seattle Times newspaper over a six year period. From the early fund raising, the public presentations, the test mock-ups through to the opening and 'acidic' criticism of Susan Nielsen (more of her later), the agonies and ecstasies are compressed into neat journalistic columns.

When the Library board of Seattle realised that its central library and many of its district libraries had started to fall into disrepair and decay, a proposal was ventured to upgrade all facilities. An ambitious plan was to be funded by means of a Library Bond - raised from an increase in local property tax. Due to the nature of such funding, extensive

lobbying and wide public consultation to raise support was undertaken before going to a vote. The proposal received overwhelming public support (70%) and gained the financial backing of two of Microsoft's billionaires (including Paul Allen - himself the son of a librarian).

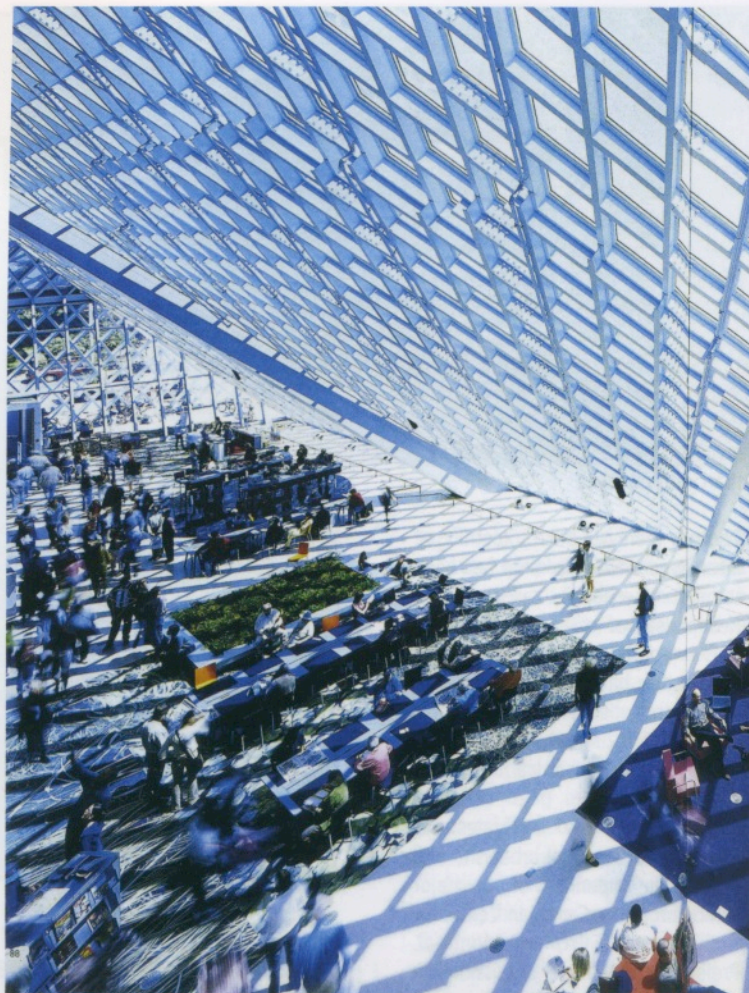
In choosing their architect an intensive 3-day selection process was initiated. The aptly named ASAP (Architectural Selection Advisory Panel) based their decision on public lectures, interviews and an open design studio for which they set the brief. At one stage the architects had to present their ideas using pencil and paper, as computers were temporarily banned. Local hero Steven Holl was



assumed by many to be the favourite - with several buildings constructed near by. But after visiting several OMA buildings in the Netherlands and impressed by the fact that typically the OMA projects were constructed at half the budget of some of Holl's projects, Rem Koolhaas and OMA were unanimously selected by both the public and the selection panel. Thus began one of the most intense public building consultation processes that has taken place in America.

At the very first presentation came a declaration by the architects that "...it would be a pity to be as boring as the context." So emerged their strategy for the distinctive stacked volumes -like books suspended horizontally in mid air. This concept - to stratify the building into five solid 'programmatic clusters' with open space between- avoided the typical endless generic floors of most contemporary libraries. The voids between these large enclosed volumes are called 'trading floors' where people interact with librarians as directly as possible to simplify information searches. They also provide large informal civic spaces that address the city and the views beyond.

The book spiral - a continuous ramp containing all non-fiction books ordered in the Dewey System from 000 to 999- has the ability to adjust and absorb the doubling of the collection. The 'Information explosion' of material that usually blockades most libraries (given time) is dealt with here in a way that is logically extreme, programmatically flexible and spatially rich.



OMA's approach: of using a kind of "perverse logic" as poetry, creates a stunning building that is in a way inadvertently beautiful. It is as if OMA have taken the texture of the American Skyscraper and turned it back in on itself to form a cubist cascade caught in a web like skin. This transparent and reflective shroud of steel and glass unites the different volumes and acts to brace the structure from twisting as well as controlling seismic movement.

The photographs reveal the usual OMA obsessions: cheapness set against sensuousness, of rough with smooth and detailing verging on 'Arte Povera'. The meeting level rooms are a series of vibrant red pebbles that curve and 'bleed' their colour from wall to floor. Like the Congrexpo in Lille the building is explored as a condition of contrasting and interconnecting territories. The list of people and consultants who worked on this \$111.9 million project is more akin to the credits of a movie, which including the local architects LMN, runs into several hundred.

All Seattleites do not admire this building. Susan Neilsen of the Seattle Times has perhaps been its most outspoken critic: "...its hideous, like a giant rabbit cage...the architects love it...and no one else dares say a peep...the library has no clothes...the architect will wake up one morning and realize he has designed the ugliest library in the world." Some people are hard to please.

Short of visiting Seattle, Verb allows you to judge for yourself. Whether you like OMA's cathedral of learning or not, the images, drawings, text and opinions reveal a radical and innovative building that is inspired by our information age; celebrated as it is by this almost outdated device: the book. ●

Paul Clarke

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